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Sexual Goals-Plans-Actions: Toward a Sexual Script in Marriage

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Sexual Goals-Plans-Actions: Toward a Sexual Script in Marriage

Abstract

This study introduces a sexual script in heterosexual marriage, based on interviews with 12 married women and 13 married men. The qualitative data analysis revealed a two-phase sexual script, beginning with priming messages and culminating in synchronizing messages. Synchronizing messages took one of three forms—in-synch, token acceptance, or out-of-synch. In-synch messages showed alignment between an initiation message and an acceptance message such that a sexual episode occurred. Token acceptance messages, made by women, conveyed compliance with a sexual episode despite low desire. Out-of-synch messages rejected an initiation message.

Keywords

Goals-Plans-Actions Theory, Sexual Communication, Sexual Scripts, Token Acceptance

Disciplines

Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Health Communication

Comments

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Sexual Goals, Plans, and Actions: Toward a Sexual Script Emerging Adults use to Delay or Abstain from Sexual Intercourse

Abstract

This mixed methods study of emerging adults investigates the messages asserted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. Goals-plans-action theory and sexual script theory inform the investigation of 192 survey participants and 27 interview participants. Results confirm that when emerging adults aspire to abstain or delay from intercourse, they enact a sexual script that includes communicative actions taken to reach their goal during conversations. This study shows phrases used to initiate a conversation, recommends the inclusion of a rationale, provides the primary and secondary goals that inform message construction, and shows three primary ways conversations unfold.

Key words: Goals-plans-action; sexual communication; sexual script theory

Sexual Goals, Plans, and Actions: Toward a Sexual Script Emerging Adults use to Delay or Abstain from Sexual Intercourse

Sexual communication is recognized as challenging, embarrassing, secretive, or difficult task requiring special effort in close relationships (Caughlin, Afifi, Carpenter-Theune, & Miller, 2005; Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 2000; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011, Theiss & Estlein, 2014). Discussing sexual topics differs from other topics such as dating, drinking, money or family concerns because sexual topics “lack openness and free-flowing talk” (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011, p. 15). Relational uncertainty exacerbates these threatening qualities of sexual communication (Theiss & Estlein, 2014). However, sexual communication messages fulfill important functions, such as granting consent, negotiating preferences, managing sexual health risks, or preventing unplanned pregnancies, among others. These functions are particularly relevant during relationship development, a salient characteristic of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Emerging adults’ sexual behaviors have, for the most part, been labeled risky because of increasing rates of STDs/STIs, fluctuating rates of unplanned pregnancy, and prevalence of date or acquaintance rape. Remedies to guard against these risks include abstaining from sexual intercourse or delaying the introduction of sexual activity into a relationship, behaviors recognized as sex positive (Harden, 2014). Some emerging adults forgo sexual intercourse, even though the majority of their peers inaugurate sexual debut and serious, intimate dating relationships (Arnett, 2000). Approximately 15-25% of emerging adults have not engaged in consensual, sexual intercourse (CDC; Centers for Disease Control, 2012; Higgins, Trussel, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Regnerus & Uecker, 2011). Messages used to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse are particularly important to investigate because communication is one means by which individuals protect their sexual boundaries and accomplish sexual goals. Research on

the tactics used to say *no* or *maybe later* would elucidate these challenging conversations. The current study, therefore, investigates the messages used to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse, relying on goals-plans-action theory (Dillard, 2015).

Goals-Plans-Action Theory

Goals-plans-action theory (GPA; Dillard, 2015) emphasizes “the message production process” used during strategic, influence interactions (Dillard & Schrader, 1998, p. 301). Message production begins with a goal, which is followed by the cognitive development of plans and the implementation of communicative actions. GPA theory acknowledges that not all actions are motivated by goals, but rather, influence interactions rely on deliberate attempts to achieve goals (Dillard & Schrader, 1998). Delay or abstain conversations are conceptualized as strategic, goal-driven episodes that rely on cognitive plans, which are expressed to influence sexual behavior outcomes. However, GPA theory, with its emphasis on message production, does not stress the outcome of conversations. Dillard and Schrader (1998) are clear that the GPA process may not result in the attainment of the desired goal. However, supporters of emerging adults (i.e., parents, public health officials, researchers, among others) who are motivated to minimize risky behaviors will want to know the result of delay or abstain conversations. Thus, *outcome* was appended to the GPA process (see Figure 1) to acknowledge the consequence of the action (not the accomplishment of the goal). The literature review integrates relevant sexual communication research with each phase in the GPA sequence.

Goals: Motivators for Behavior

Goals are defined as “future states of affairs that an individual is committed to achieving or maintaining” (Dillard, 2015, p. 65). GPA suggests primary and secondary goals operate during influence interactions, where primary goals stipulate what the interaction pertains to while

secondary goals reflect general motivations that recur in a person's life (Dillard, Segrin, & Harden, 1989). In the current investigation, the primary goal pertains to interactions where at least one individual seeks to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse.

Multiple meanings of *abstinence* impede shared understanding of research findings (Ott, Pfeiffer, & Fortenberry, 2006; Santelli, Ott, Lyon, Rogers, Summers, & Schleifer, 2006; Wilson, Smith, & Menn, 2013). For example, 45% of high school freshmen reported *not having oral sex* as part of the definition for abstinence until marriage, whereas the remaining 55% did not report this behavior as an aspect of abstinence (Wilson et al., 2013). Further, abstinence does not always equate to virginity, as evidenced by researchers who used the term to describe refraining from sexual activity after an STI diagnosis (Gallo, Margolis, Malotte, Rietmeijer, Klausner, O'Donnell, & Warner, 2016). Similarly, individuals who report regret following a sexual episode (e.g., Fisher, Worth, Garcia, & Meredith, 2012) may decide to abstain in the future, a practice labeled *secondary abstinence* (Loewenson, Ireland, & Resnick, 2004).

Another definitional issue complicates research on sexual communication and behavior—defining the term *have sex*. Research by Peck, Manning, Tri, Skrzypczynski, Summers, and Grubb (2016) showed that nearly all research participants agreed penile-vaginal intercourse constituted having sex. However, 85% of the participants considered penis penetration in the anus/rectum as having sex and over half viewed oral sex as having sex. A small minority, 14%, even considered French kissing to be having sex. Due to these varying interpretations of the term *have sex*, and in light of the near universal agreement that intercourse constitutes having sex, the phrase *sexual intercourse* will be used in this study. With these two definitional issues in mind, *abstinence* will be defined as the intention to wait to have sexual intercourse until marriage.

Delaying is distinguishable from abstaining and refers to waiting to introduce sexual intercourse into a relationship. Those who are delaying say they are open to engaging in intercourse before marriage, yet need some pivotal event to justify having sex whether for the first time or in a new relationship (e.g., Cummings et al., 2014; Hull, Hennessy, Bleakley, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011). The intent to abstain or delay may necessitate different communication plans and actions.

Goals-plans-action scholars have sorted primary influence goals into specific categories (Dillard, Anderson, & Knobloch, 2002) that can be adapted to sexual negotiation situations. The motivation to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse likely aligns with at least four of seven of GPA's primary influence goals. First, abstaining or delaying motivated by a *shared activity* would be mutually agreed upon as a way to support each other in their aspiration *not* to have sex and to deepen the intimacy between the partners. Second, abstainers or delayers may want to *alter the nature of the relationship* and need a specific relational turning point, such as the mutual profession of love, cohabitation, or marriage, to signal the inauguration of sexual intercourse into the relationship. Third, partners could *seek permission* to abstain or delay, particularly if fear of rejection is a concern. In this way, one partner may want to invite the other into a joint decision-making conversation. Fourth, individuals who make a purity pledge or identify as an abstainer (Mullaney, 2006) could *enforce rights and commitments*. In this way, individuals assert their intentions to abstain or delay and accept the response from the partner, whether that response accepts or rejects the message. The first research questions ascertain if these primary influence goals operate in abstain or delay situations and if the goals differ between those who are abstaining and delaying.

RQ1a: What primary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?

RQ1b: Do the primary influence goals differ between abstainers and delayers?

Secondary goals within the GPA framework were found to relate to identity, conversation management, relational resources, or personal resources (Dillard, 2015). The secondary goals for abstaining or delaying may fall under these categories and/or may be unique because of the nature of the sexual context. Specific motivations for abstinence among adolescents include commitment to self-schema, risk of disappointing authority figures, fear/apprehension of the sexual experience, fear of physical consequences, valuing virginity, reputation regret, no opportunity/not important, and manipulation (Dunsmore, 2005). The second research question extends these sexual motivations for abstinence to emerging adults, includes delay conversations, and tests for differences between abstainers and delayers.

RQ2a: What secondary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?

RQ2b: Do the secondary goals differ between abstainers and delayers?

Plans: Intrapsychic Scripts

The GPA framework describes plans as “representations of verbal and nonverbal behaviors and behavior sequences” (Dillard et al., 2002, p. 439) that influence the conversational partner. Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) augments GPA theory in this segment by defining plans as cognitive processes that “link individual desires to social meanings” (p. 100). The traditional sexual script depicts a plan by outlining a sequence of verbal and nonverbal movements advancing toward sexual intercourse (LaFrance, 2010; Simon & Gagnon, 1987). These scripts stipulate who participates, what each actor is expected to do, and where the episode occurs. Detailed moments of the traditional sexual script in heterosexual interactions indicate 64 unique behaviors (Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 1993). At each turn of the sexual script, men and women perform specific, culturally recognized, gendered behaviors (Masters, Casey, Wells, & Morrison,

2013; Wiederman, 2005). Scripts benefit relational partners when the meaning attached at each turn of an interaction is understood, thereby decreasing uncertainty (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Naturally, sexual activity performances include considerable improvisation (Simon & Gagnon, 1986), but the traditional sexual script typifies a generally recognized sequence of interaction.

The traditional sexual script lays out interactional turns preceding a sexual episode. However, if one partner plans to delay or abstain, relying on the traditional sexual script would infuse disharmony during an interaction. Saying *I think this is moving too fast* was a moment in the fictional sex scripts that college students perceived as most likely to deter sex (LaFrance, 2010). This statement hints at a possible communication action to use when one's goal is to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse. The traditional sex script pertains to episodes where consensual intercourse is the result, but some partners prefer to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse. No known sexual script is available for these individuals or couples. In fact, rejection messages, which could be used to express the goal of abstaining or delaying, may be the most unscripted aspect of sexual interactions because some rejecters indicate they don't know what to say to a relational partner (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). It is helpful, then, to gather data about individuals who are abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse to understand the message tactics they use. Analyzing abstain or delay messages will supplement the sexual script research with a new path of interactional moments that achieve the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse. The next research question therefore asks:

RQ3: How does a sexual script for abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse unfold for emerging adults?

Action: Sexual Influence Strategies

The GPA literature defines actions simply as behaviors (Dillard et al., 2002). The communicative actions necessary to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse connect with the sexual negotiation literature, which has analyzed compliance-gaining and resisting strategies (Edgar & Fitzpatrick, 1990; Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 1992). To that end, strategies have been identified as the degree of directness and the application of verbal or nonverbal messages (e.g., Bevan, 2003; Metts et al., 1992). Moderately direct rejection messages were found to achieve the sender's goal while also saving face (Metts et al., 1992), even though direct messages were found to be more effective (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). Additionally, four strategies—antisocial acts, emotional and physical closeness, logic and reason, and pressure and manipulation—operated when undergraduate students wanted to escalate or delay sexual activity, with logic and reason strategies used most frequently (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). A more recent study on the effects of alcohol consumption on refusal messages showed 11 different strategies females employ to refuse a sexual episode: avoidance, inappropriate to the relationship, excuse, apology, terminate the relationship, concession, offer alternative, compliment, insult, flat refusal, or other (Lannutti & Monahan, 2004). The goal of refusing differs from the goals of abstaining or delaying; however, the messages used with either goal may have some overlap. Continued understanding of message deployment would equip individuals with specific actions to express sexual goals. The next research question asks:

RQ4: What influence tactics are used to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse among emerging adults?

Outcomes

Myriad outcomes are conceivable at the intersection of intention and behavior because individuals do not always behave as they intend. Certainly, some individuals consistently behave

in the ways they intend. For example, the intention to not have sex predicted not engaging in sex in a longitudinal study of adolescents (Hull et al., 2011), and the intent to have sex positively predicted sexual initiation in the same sample (Busse, Fishbein, Bleakley, & Hennessy, 2010). However, some individuals intend to behave in a particular way, yet behave in different ways. For example, HIV-positive men reported their intention to have sex despite their diagnosis, yet were found to engage in abstinence behaviors 12 months after initial data collection (McFarland et al., 2012). Individuals could communicate intentions to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse, yet change their minds as other sexual behaviors unfold. These situations place individuals at a turning point where they can advance to sexual intercourse or curb activity. Further, individuals may nonverbally attempt to communicate the intention to abstain or delay, which leaves their relational partners to accurately decipher the intent. Individuals may also be undecided or ambivalent about their own goals (O'Sullivan & Gaines, 1998). Thus, relational partners may approach interactions with a specific goal in mind, may or may not clearly communicate that goal, or may or may not enforce that goal as the interaction evolves. This study assumes the intention of abstain/delay conversations is to refrain from sexual intercourse. The next research question ascertains the outcomes of abstain/delay conversations.

RQ5: What are the behavioral outcomes after abstain or delay conversations for emerging adults?

Mixed Methods Research

This investigation employed a mixed-method design to answer the research questions, which emphasize the process of abstain or delay conversations. Survey and interview data were utilized to depict essential elements of abstain or delay conversations.

Quantitative

Participants. Students enrolled in introduction to psychology or communication courses from a large, Midwestern university participated in a survey, approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB). Useable surveys were collected from 192 participants, 139 females (72%) and 52 males (27%) with an average age of 20. Additional demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Procedures. Students received one course credit for participating in an online survey generated with Qualtrics. An initial 450 students (approximately 1/3 of students enrolled in the courses) selected this research project to obtain course credit. The survey opened with the informed consent information. Then, participants responded *true* or *false* to the statement, 'I have had a conversation with a relational partner indicating that I wanted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. This conversation occurred within the previous 12 months.' From the initial 450 students, 192 (43%) responded *true* to this item and completed the survey.

Survey Instrument. Participants indicated their sexual behavior goal by checking *abstain*, *delay*, or *other*. Next, participants responded to an open-ended prompt to ascertain primary influence goals: *Type out the details of the conversation. What did you and your partner say during the conversation as best as you can recall? Please use fictitious names and be as specific as possible when writing what each person said.* Coding of the open-ended survey responses was conducted in two ways. First, attribute coding, which is used to summarize basic descriptive information (Saldaña, 2013), initialized the data analysis by noting the biological sex of the message initiator and noting common *in vivo* codes. Second, provisional coding, which relies on a predetermined set of codes based on theory or previous research (Saldaña, 2013), was used by relying on four of seven of GPA's primary goals—share activity, change relationship, obtain permission, and enforce rights and obligations. Coders used these *a priori* categories to

assign their interpretation of each message. Three undergraduate, communication studies majors familiar with GPA theory participated in training and coding sessions to select and agree upon primary goals for each message. They were instructed to focus on the person who made the abstain/delay statement, unless the participant used *we* language, in which case the coders interpreted the goal as a shared activity. The primary investigator recorded the students' analyses, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. Intercoder reliability estimates were strong with 97.9% agreement and Cohen's kappa, .964.

Secondary influence goals. The sexual abstinence motivation scale (SAMS; Dunsmore, 2005) was found in an unpublished dissertation and exhibited face validity to measure secondary goals. Instructions were expanded to include delaying. The measure included 41 stems for the sentence that began *I am/was sexually abstinent because* (see Table 2). The Likert-type scale ranged from 1 = *not motivating at all* to 5 = *extremely motivating*. A split-half reliability analysis was performed, and the Spearman-Brown corrected correlation coefficient was $r = .95$.

Influence tactics. The open-ended narratives included specific quotations from the participants. The coders identified specific words or phrases the participants used *in-vivo*.

What happened? Participants reported behavioral outcomes by selecting either of these choices: (a) on the day of the conversation, we did not have sexual intercourse or (b) on the day of the conversation, we did have sexual intercourse. Participants reported relational outcomes by selecting one of these choices: (a) that relational partner broke up with me as a result of this conversation, (b) that relational partner complied but we have since broken up for other reasons, (c) that relational partner and I are still together, or (d) other.

Qualitative

Participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 emerging adults—seven from the survey participants and 20 from separate recruitment—from a large, Midwestern university. Participants included 20 females and 7 males; 23 heterosexuals and 4 homosexual, bisexual, or other; 22 White/Caucasian and five with other ethnicities. The average age was 20 with a range of 18-24. Students came from myriad academic majors. The average religious importance was 4.67 where seven indicated highly important. The mode was seven with eight participants indicating that religion was very important to them.

Procedures. At the end of the survey, participants were invited to complete a face-to-face interview for an additional course credit. Twenty-three indicated they could be contacted, and seven volunteered to participate. A second recruitment effort was approved by the IRB to increase the number of interviewees. Nearly 5,500 students were randomly selected from 36,000 to receive an email recruitment message. A compensation incentive of a \$10 Target gift card was included. These messages invited anyone who had conversed about abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse in the previous 12 months. Twenty students agreed to participate.

All 27 interviews were held in an on-campus conference room or the investigator's office. The consent form and a demographic form were reviewed before the interviews began. The semi-structured interview guide contained 12 questions that inquired about delaying and abstaining conversation details, identifying conversational goals and outcomes, disclosing concerns about partner response, and appraising personal effectiveness. Participants received a list of mental health resources after the interview in case they felt the need to discuss particular issues with a professional. Audio-recorded interviews ranged from 9 to 34 minutes with an average time of 20 minutes and yielded 215 pages of single-spaced data, transcribed by the

author. Given the low probability of engaging in sexual communication and the complexity in talking about sex (Theiss & Estlein, 2014), the length of these interviews is not surprising.

Data analysis. The interview data were analyzed by the author with thematic analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During transcription, brief notes known as asides were bracketed into the transcribed data to explain or clarify a particular detail from the interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Commentaries, which are substantial paragraphs following a short interaction within the interview, captured immediate thoughts or theoretical connections. The commentaries were useful to thread excerpts from one interview to another. In-process memos were composed in a document separate from the transcripts to record early interpretations of the data. The iterative processes of interviewing, transcribing, reflecting, interpreting, and writing continued throughout the data collection and early analysis period. Careful, repeated, and reflective reading of the transcripts, commentaries, and in-process memos aggregated similar ideas or concepts together in separate files with category labels (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Categories that had the potential to answer the research questions for this study were analyzed to understand the experiences of the participants.

Verification. Three verification techniques were used to provide trust and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the data. First, persistent observation (Creswell, 1997) was used *in situ* by checking for inconsistencies in the participants' responses. Paraphrasing, clarifying, and probing questions resolved inconsistencies or unclear information. Second, rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 1997) are included in the results section by inserting quotations. Third, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were conducted after data analysis. Participants who wanted to participate in member checks were sent a one page summary of the results. They were asked to read the summary and comment on how well the results matched their lived experience.

Three interview participants responded, indicating the interpretations were a good representation of their experiences.

Results

Goals

Primary goals. The first research question asked for a description of the primary goals expressed during abstain/delay conversations. A frequency analysis showed that enforcing rights was the primary goal for 43% ($n = 82$), 22% each ($n = 42$) for changing the relationship and sharing an activity, and 2% ($n = 3$) for obtaining permission. The remaining 12% ($n = 23$) could not be coded because these participants did not include information regarding motivation in their open-ended narratives.

The first research question also asked whether the primary influence goals differ between abstainers and delayers. Preliminary analysis of frequency distributions indicated that participants were less likely to report the intention of abstaining (27%; $n = 52$), than delaying (69%; $n = 133$) (7 respondents reported “other”). Therefore, in order to compare the relative distribution of goals between those who enacted a conversation intended to abstain compared to those who intended to delay sex, a two-way contingency analysis was used. Results indicated a significant difference between abstain and delay conversations, Pearson χ^2 (4, $N = 185$) = 12.70, $p < .05$, Cramer’s $V = .26$. The proportion of delayers (.28) using the goal of changing the relationship was higher than abstainers (.06). Abstainers were higher than delayers on enforcing rights (.52, .41), and sharing an activity (.31, .19).

Secondary goals. The second research question asked, “What secondary influence goals apply to the abstaining or delaying context?” The SAMS measure was subjected to criterion and content validity analysis and principal components analysis during its development (Dunsmore,

2005). Therefore, analysis of SAMS in this study began with an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation using SPSS. The EFA showed that an eight factor solution explained 68% of the variance. Each of the eight factors had eigenvalues greater than one (Kaiser, 1960). Dunsmore's (2005) analysis supported an eight factor solution, as well. However, the scree test (Cattell, 1966) showed a two factor solution, which theoretically does not retain content validity, but questions the parsimony of the scale. A subjective review of the original eight factors and their corresponding items showed at least three issues. First, 5 of the 16 items on the first factor, *commitment to self-schema*, loaded on more than one factor. Second, content validity was scrutinized and misalignment of some items on a factor was noted to be problematic. Specifically, item analysis of the rotated factor matrix showed two items with factor loadings below .40 and these were deleted (i.e., *don't want to have a bad reputation* and *worry what my friends would think if I had sex*). Third, three factors had fewer than three items load, which indicates a weak or unstable factor (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

A second EFA was performed with a forced 5-factor solution, which explained 58% of the variance. Three items had factor loadings below .40 and were eliminated (i.e., *too busy to think about sex*, *if I have an STI I don't want to pass it on to my partner*, *sex is not important to me right now*). The fifth factor had only two items load, so the analysis was repeated with a forced 4-factor solution, which explained 56% of the variance. Four items had factor loadings below .40 and were removed from analysis. The next execution of EFA removed these four items and retained the forced, four factor solution, resulting in four factors that explained 60% of the variance with each item loading on one factor with at least a .40. Table 3 shows the revised scale, factor loadings, Eigenvalues, and variances. Reliability of the new 32-item revised scale was strong ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 86.61$, $SD = 25.66$). The four factors retained answer the research

question by applying the following labels: Factor 1 *God and Parents*; Factor 2 *Respect for Self and Partner*; Factor 3 *Body and Performance*; and Factor 4 *Game Playing*.

The research question also asked if the motivations differed between abstainers and delayers. An ANOVA analysis showed that the *God and parents* factor was significantly different between abstainers and delayers, $F(2, 189) = 24.83, p < .01, \eta^2 = .21$. The post hoc Tukey HSD showed that abstainers ($M = 41.14, SD = 13.45$) were more motivated by this factor than delayers ($M = 26.69, SD = 11.80$). *Respect for self and partner* was also significantly different, $F(2, 189) = 27.53, p < .01, \eta^2 = .23$. Abstainers ($M = 44.9, SD = 8.35$) were more motivated by this factor than delayers ($M = 33.6; SD = 10.49$). There were no significant differences between abstainers and delayers on *body and performance* or *game playing*.

Plans: Sexual Script

The third research question asked how a sexual script advancing toward abstinence or delaying sexual intercourse would unfold. Responses from the interview data provided nuanced details about the moments leading up to and formulating abstain/delay conversations. The summation of a typical script was expressed by one participant:

I kind of started it by making it a non-conversation. And. Cause the first conversation is very short and just like ‘do you want to?’ And then it’s just ‘no.’ And then that’s the end of that conversation. But then later on it comes up, ‘Why?’ um, and so for me personally it’s just. I don’t want to be intimate with someone until there is some sort of commitment on both sides or some sort of emotional connection. And so just talking through that with the other person is important to me. (21F:41-47)

This quote begins by describing a ‘non-conversation.’ Several participants also described brief, succinct messages to indicate *no*. These interactions were similar because they all coincided with

sexual activity. As sexual activity escalated and intercourse was on the horizon, the abstaining/delaying partner would assert ‘no’ and/or use distancing body movements to indicate the disinterest in intercourse. Later, many of these relational partners would have a conversation about personal perspectives on sexual activity. These conversations surfaced during other relational talk or were designated as a specific conversation to discuss intercourse.

There were also participants who initiated a conversation before any sexual activity occurred. With or without a precipitating physical episode, the conversations included similar information. Nearly all participants agreed that a conversation about delaying or abstaining should include a rationale for the intent to abstain or delay. These explanations tended to follow one of three lines of reasoning. First, participants wanted to maintain a personal boundary. These messages used the *I* pronoun accompanied by a proclamation that left little room for discussion. Participants who used this perspective recognized abstaining or delaying as a personal choice and reflected this independence in their comments. These messages reflected individuals’ sexual boundaries and insinuated an expectation that the message be honored and respected in future interactions.

It just came up naturally in conversation, just because he has had one sexual partner, and so he asked me, like, if I was ever going to be comfortable with that, or what I was comfortable with. He never really pushed me farther than I wanted to go, and so I told him that I wasn’t planning on having sexual intercourse until I was married. (5F:59-62)

Second, participants described conversational messages as a joint decision. These messages invited the relational partner to collaborate and reach agreement about the sexual activity they would or would not engage in. These ‘it’s about us’ messages incited the joint activity of sex and the need to discuss physical interactions as a dyadic endeavor. Interview participants mentioned the turn-taking, where one person expressed a desire for the couple and invited the partner to

reciprocate. In this way, the conversations reflected the need to engage in joint decision making about an activity requiring both participants.

Like, I had to explain to him why it was important for both of us, not just me, that way he would understand that it was, it would be a benefit to him as well. Cause if I just made it sound like it was just about me, and I want to be apart, I want to be closer to God, I want to be like, you know, not have sex until I'm married, is something that I want to do, that doesn't sound too good to him. (9F:187-191)

Third, participants demanded that no sexual intercourse would happen. These messages used the 'we' pronoun, but were declarative statements leaving the partner without an invitation to participate in the decision. The next participant received a series of text messages from his partner, "I don't feel that we have that emotional connection' and things like that. And then she just texted me, 'I think we should abstain from sex'" (27M:59-60). The elements described above were shared across several participants and provide foundational data upon which to build a more elaborate script for abstaining or delaying conversations.

Actions: Influence Tactics

The next research question asked, 'What influence tactics are used to express the goal of abstaining from or delaying sexual intercourse?' The most frequent words or phrases used verbatim in survey participants' open-ended narratives were *not ready* ($n = 46$), *want to wait/delay* ($n = 91$), or *wait until marriage* ($n = 43$). Coders also counted the biological sex of the message initiator to which 23 were initiated by males and 97 by females, with 65 scenarios written in such a way that the sex was indiscernible.

Behavioral Outcome

The final research question asked, “What are the behavioral outcomes of abstain or delay conversations?” The participants recalled that on the day of the conversation, 94% ($n = 180$) did not have sexual intercourse. As for relational outcomes, 50% ($n = 96$) of the participants remain with the partner reported on in the study, 40% ($n = 77$) had broken up for reasons other than abstaining or delaying, and 3% ($n = 6$) said they broke up as a result of this conversation.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate messages asserted to delay or abstain from sexual intercourse. Goals-plans-action theory provided a useful theoretical perspective to decompose and analyze the production of these messages. The inclusion of sexual script theory augmented the analysis by outlining the flow of a conversation. With these two theories, the study contributes theoretical perspectives to sexual communication research. The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data presents practical ideas about composing abstain or delay messages. The discussion section elaborates on three primary findings: (a) confirming that abstaining or delaying from sexual intercourse are sexual goals for some emerging adults; (b) planning a patterned script to achieve abstain or delay goals; and (c) acting on the plan with specific phrases to influence a partner. The outcome of the conversations is discussed, as well.

Goals: Confirming Abstain/Delay

The study confirmed that some emerging adults aspire to abstain or delay from sexual intercourse (e.g., Rasberry & Goodson, 2009). Nearly three-fourths of the participants indicated their intent to delay sexual intercourse and the other one-fourth reported the intent to abstain. This finding provides evidence to parents who rely on social scientific research to promote abstinence-only sex education and/or purity pledges (see Manning, 2017). Given that half of the sample indicated they were virgins, we can deduce that some of those who selected a delaying

goal were contemplating their sexual debut. Future research should examine the differences between virgins and non-virgins in their communicative tactics. Other sources (e.g., CDC, 2012; Higgins et al., 2010) have similarly shown that approximately 25% of emerging adults abstain from sexual intercourse. Abstaining and delaying messages affirm that some emerging adults communicate their intentions about not introducing sexual intercourse into their relationships, which exemplifies mature sexual behavior and decision making advocated by adults (e.g., Kirby, 2008). These goals may be difficult to accomplish in a culture inundated with sexual exploitation, marketing, and assumptions of sexual intercourse among emerging adults, which reinforces the need to provide information on composing abstain or delay messages. Abstaining and delaying should be recognized and supported as viable sexual choices for emerging adults, an admonition consistent with a sex positive framework (Harden, 2014).

Plans and Actions: A Sexual Script

Conversations described by interview participants suggest an outline for a sexual script ending with not having sex. This study contributes to sexual script theorizing by introducing a pattern of interaction taken to abstain from or delay intercourse, in contrast to other sexual script scholarship that focuses on the accomplishment of intercourse (e.g., LaFrance, 2010; Simon & Gagnon, 1986, 1987). Indeed, theorizing about sexual communication benefits from research about process (Coffelt & Olson, 2014) and “sequences of behaviors” (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016, p. 470).

Some of the conversations described by the participants in this study were preceded by an episode of escalating physical activity. Research on the traditional sex script showed that physical activity may stall with the statement ‘I think this is moving too fast’ (LaFrance, 2010). However, the interview participants in this study shared that, in their experiences, nonverbal

distancing or succinct *no* messages were used to hamper intercourse when sexual activity was underway. The nonverbal distancing strategy is less face threatening than verbal statements and could be used when an individual is concerned about maintaining the relationship. This tactic could also be subject to misinterpretation and require subsequent messages to clarify one's intent. Perhaps recent media attention on sexual assault has prompted emerging adults to be clear in their assertions of disinterest in intercourse. The use of an explicit strategy is surprising given that brief, direct messages are face threatening (Metts & Spitzberg, 1996). However, they are also efficient. Considering the average sexual episode lasts seven minutes (Miller & Byers, 2004), a partner does not have much time to use many words or to provide an elaborate explanation to express the intent not to have sex. Additionally, longer statements may dampen the mood and end all sexual activity abruptly. Even though intercourse may not be desired, climax can be achieved or partners can decrescendo toward a gradual, satisfactory end to the episode. These individuals later discussed their sexual goals.

Deliberate conversations were described by the participants who engaged in a preceding physical episode and those who did not. These conversations were initiated by the abstainer/delayer with an opening statement that invoked one of three phrases. Over half of the survey participants declared 'I want to wait/delay' in their opening line. This phrase seems to convey the intent while also leaving oneself open for the possibility of intercourse in the future. Approximately one fourth said 'I'm not ready.' Female adolescents between 15 and 19 described 'not ready' as not having the maturity to be sexually active (Long-Middleton, Burke, Cahill Lawrence, & Amudala, 2013), and college students described emotional investment as a predictor for sexual behaviors (Hill, 2002). Expounding on the meaning of *readiness* would contribute to the sexual communication research and, when examined concurrently with the

interpretations of *have sex* (Peck et al., 2016), may decipher some of the uncertainty about sexual intercourse during relationship development. The remaining fourth said they wanted to ‘wait until marriage.’ These individuals clearly intend to abstain from sex and recognize matrimony as the pivotal event when intercourse can enter their relationship. This message may deter relationship continuation if a partner does not want to wait until marriage. However, this statement provides the sender an opportunity to vet shared values in a partner and assess potential fit as a life mate. Religious individuals who abstain acknowledge the benefits of dating like-minded partners (Kosenko, Applewhite, Drury, & Ash, 2016).

After the opening statement, a rationale or explanation was provided. The survey data analyzing secondary goals illustrates the motivating factors that contribute to the expressed rationale. Specifically, the factors of *God and parents, respect for self and partner, body and performance, and game playing* contributed to motivation for abstaining or delaying. In fact, *God and parents* explained more variance than the other three factors combined, suggesting these external forces influence the decision making of emerging adults who want to abstain/delay. Such an interpretation would substantiate some parents’ beliefs that their communication about purity and abstinence are constructive (Manning, 2017). Given that the mode age of the sample was 19, this study supports other research (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Nichols & Islas, 2015) that shows the influence parents retain in the lives of emerging adults who are in college. Additionally, the importance of religion has been noted as a motivating factor for abstinence among high schoolers aged 16-18 (Abbott & Dalla, 2008). While the importance decreases during adolescence (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007), this study aligns with others that show that religious beliefs influence some emerging adults in their decision to abstain from sexual activity (Abbott & Dalla, 2008; Kosenko et al., 2016; Smith & Denton, 2005).

The secondary goals of *God and parents* and *respect for self* differed between abstainers and delayers, where abstainers had higher mean scores on each of these factors. The four factors collectively accounted for 60% of the variance, leaving 40% of the variance yet unexplained. Given that the SAMS instrument was designed for abstinence only situations among adolescents, it could be that delayers have motivations that were not introduced in the SAMS instrument. This analysis suggests that extending the SAMS instrument to emerging adults and delayers has limitations. Future research on only delayers would yield information that expounds on their unique motivations and goals. There were no significant differences between abstainers and delayers on *body and performance* and *game playing*, which each also explained a very small percent of the variance. These factors maintain a much less significant role in the motivations of emerging adults who abstain or delay.

After expressing the rationale, conversations took one of three different paths according to the quantitative and qualitative data. First, enforcing rights and obligations was the primary goal most evident in the respondents' conversational depictions. These messages declared one's intention not to participate in sexual intercourse by establishing a personal boundary and asserting their intentions to their partner. Communicating this goal may require assertiveness skills because there appears to be no room for negotiation with this strategy.

Second, some participants seemed to be guided by the primary goal of a shared activity or changing the relationship. While coded as two separate primary goals, these goals were coded with identical frequencies and they may be indistinguishable when articulated. These individuals wanted the decision to delay or abstain to be a joint decision, one discussed and agreed upon as a couple for the sake of the relationship. These messages recognize the relational impact of sexual intercourse and convey the importance of the first episode as a pivotal signifier in relationship

development. These messages further impart the sender's emphasis on the relational quality of sexual intercourse and the intent to invite the partner into the same perspective. Previous research has suggested that marriage is the pivotal moment that changes the relationship (Abbott & Dalla, 2008), although given the majority of emerging adults who have sex, less committed forms of relationships are also recognized as acceptable for sexual intercourse. Messages focused on changing the relationship could derail a hook-up attempt if one of the partners seeks greater interdependence as a prerequisite for sexual intercourse. Indeed, this goal insists on continued relationship development before implementing intercourse. The goal of sharing an activity was expressed with the same frequency as changing the relationship. For individuals who expressed these goals, abstaining/delaying might have demanded effortful constraint, but the commitment not to have sex was reinforced by each person in the relationship.

Third, some interview participants described a demand that the partner comply with abstaining/delaying behaviors in the relationship. These messages were declarative statements, similar to the enforcing rights messages, but they used plural pronouns rather than singular pronouns. In this way, the messages were interpreted as demands of a partner that left no room for discussion or negotiation. The analysis of primary goals showed another possibility for conversations was to obtain permission. This possibility was reported by only three survey participants and no interview participants. This option is a likely outlier, and the experiences of individuals who believe they need to seek permission to abstain or delay sex should be examined in future qualitative studies.

Outcomes

Research on GPA theory is enhanced in this study by including the outcomes of an interaction. Sexual communication research often focuses on communicative and behavioral

outcomes of conversations to show support for talking about sex in several relational contexts (e.g., Coffelt & Olson, 2014). In this study, the plans followed and actions taken by participants resulted in compliance as reported by 94% of the participants. This datum suggests that the meaning of the messages was understood and respected. This finding aligns with the results of an experimental study in which men indicated they would stop advancing if a woman said *no* (Byers & Wilson, 1985). The results of this study do not indicate that a break-up is a likely relational outcome, which could be a fear of someone who wants to abstain or delay and maintain a relationship. In this study, 6% of the participants engaged in sexual intercourse, even though one of the partners had indicated a goal of abstaining or delaying. Abstain or delay comments in the moments of sexual arousal escalate the risk for sexual assault. Certainly, there is a need for additional research to understand the sexual influence tactics invoked in these situations and reasons for non-compliance.

Limitations and Future Research

Future studies can overcome the limitations in this study in at least five ways. First, a probability sampling strategy would permit generalization of the results and could also overcome the disproportionate number of males in the current sample (52, 72%). Second, operationalization of abstain/delay conversations needs concrete, quantifiable measures, rather than relying on independent coders. Third, participants need the opportunity to report the nature of the relationship with the individual who was in the abstaining or delaying conversation. Tactics likely differ between a hook-up context and a dating relationship, for example, and these contextual factors warrant investigation. Fourth, the sample size is on the cusp of acceptability for factor analysis by some standards (i.e., five subjects/item ratio; Tinsley & Tinsley, 1987) and deemed fair by other criteria (Comrey, 1988). However, this analysis provides early evidence of

the SAMS scale's validity and improves its parsimony. Future research should continue to examine the factor structure of this instrument with larger sample sizes. Fifth, future research should echo the methods of LaFrance's (2010) sexual script research and investigate very specific moments in a sexual script leading up to not having sex.

In sum, this study offers emerging adults specific strategies to implement to abstain from or delay sexual intercourse and shows the outcomes of those strategies. The communicative actions employed during these interactions can be included in intervention programs, which have been shown to improve attitudes about abstinence, alter sexual behavior intentions, and change intentions to use safe sex practices (Realini, Buzi, Smith, & Martinez, 2010). There are emerging adults who benefit from research on conversational strategies and messages to abstain/delay from sexual intercourse. Emerging adults may be equipped to assert abstain or delay messages and make sexual goal expression clear with the findings from this and related studies.

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